

Maintaining Intellectual Freedom in a Filtered World

We trust Americans to recognize propaganda and misinformation and to make their own decisions about what they read and believe. We do not believe they need the help of censors to assist them in this task.

—American Library Association's "Library Bill of Rights"

Young people have First Amendment rights.
—American Library Association

The concepts of intellectual freedom as expressed in these two quotations are as relevant to information in electronic formats as they are in print.

As a proponent of intellectual freedom, I advocated and received administrative support for unfiltered Internet access in the Mankato Area (Minnesota) Public Schools from 1994 through 2001. But because of the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA), our district installed an Internet filter. I was expecting a raft of problems.

I was concerned that students would rise in revolt after having Internet sites blocked as they searched for information. I was worried that by installing a filter, teachers would abandon their role as guide and supervisor when students were online. I feared the light of education would glow less brightly as a result of the diminished staff and student access to a variety of information sources and

opinions. I was certain I was violating my long-held personal beliefs that every individual, regardless of age, has the right to access and read a multiplicity of ideas and viewpoints, free of censorship in any form.

I must admit that my pragmatic side had its doubts about the wisdom of our district's not having a filtering device installed. Technology had opened floodgates of information into our schools by way of the Internet, and those rising waters included flotsam and sewage. Materials and ideas that had been physically inaccessible to students now could be viewed, both purposely and accidentally, right in our media centers and classrooms.

The potential of student access to unsavory and possibly unsafe materials on the Internet had made support of intellectual freedom extremely challenging. It is difficult to justify a resource that allows second graders to view graphic sexual acts accidentally while searching for innocuous information, communication by anorexic teens with supportive fellow anorexics, or access by seventh graders to "Build Your Own Computer Virus" Web sites. Defending unfiltered Internet access was quite different from defending *The Catcher in the Rye*. But just because something is difficult, does not make it wrong.

By Doug Johnson

Subject: Filtering software, safety

Grades: K-12 (Ages 5-18)

Standards: NETS•S 2; NETS•TVI;
NETS•A VI (<http://www.iste.org/nets/>)

Happily, the sky has not fallen since we installed our filter. The complaints about overblocking and underblocking from teachers and students have numbered less than a dozen since 2001. I was surprised in light of what I had been hearing from media specialists in other school districts who complained about the filters and filtering policies in their districts.

Why did we seem to have maintained some semblance of intellectual freedom in our schools?

Some background first.

Did we have to install an Internet filter in our district? If we wished to comply with CIPA requirements and thus remain eligible for federal funds, including E-rate, the answer was yes.

Yet, we had major reservations about filtering devices. Using and relying solely on these imperfect products to limit students' access to "sites deemed harmful" might:

- Underblock, leaving inappropriate sites accessible
- Overblock, preventing access to appropriate sites
- Block sites deemed not politically acceptable (including anti-filter sites) to the filtering authors
- Leave access to inappropriate peer-to-peer networks, chat rooms, or images that cannot be blocked
- Be disabled or worked around by our clever and ambitious students
- Give teachers, media specialists, administrators, parents, and legislators a false sense of security

Our concern was fueled by studies such as "Internet Blocking in Public Schools" by the Electronic Freedom Foundation, which examined nearly one million Web pages. The researchers found the following:

- For every Web page blocked as advertised, blocking software blocks one or more Web pages inappropriately. 97%–99% of the Web pages blocked were done so using non-

standard, discretionary, and potentially illegal criteria beyond what is required by CIPA.

- Internet blocking software was not able to detect and protect students from access to many of the apparently pornographic sites that appeared in search results related to state-mandated curriculums.

And, as anyone who has worked with children knows, a certain percentage of young people will see any "block" as simply a challenge to find a way around. Students can circumvent filters by:

- Disabling software through simple keyboard combinations
- Using specialized software, such as that available from Peacefire
- Changing a browser's proxy to an unfiltered site
- Using an anonymizer like Akamai
- Logging into the filtering server using a default administrator's password if not disabled

We took a number of proactive measures to make sure students and staff could operate in the least restrictive Internet environment possible, keep students safe, and yet meet the requirements of CIPA.

First, we based our choice of filters not on cost or convenience but on features and customizability, and we chose the least restrictive settings of the installed filter.

Internet filters have a wide range of restrictiveness. Depending on the product, the settings, and the ability to override the filter to permit access to individual sites, filters can either block a high percentage of the Internet resources (specific Web sites, e-mail, chat rooms, etc.) or a relatively small number of sites.

The Electronic Freedom Foundation study also revealed some other interesting numbers:

- Schools that implement blocking software with the least restrictive

settings will block between .5% and 5% of search results based on state-mandated curriculum topics.

- Schools that implement Internet blocking software with the most restrictive settings will block up to 70% of search results based on state-mandated curriculum topics.

Caroline R. Richardson, of the Department of Family Medicine at the University of Michigan Medical School, and her colleagues examined how well seven Internet filters blocked health information for teens at settings from least restrictive to very restrictive. They found that at the least restrictive setting, only 1.4% of the health information sites were blocked and 87% of the pornography sites were blocked. At the most restrictive setting, 24% of the health information sites were blocked, with still only 91% of the pornography sites blocked.

Given the tendency to overblock, we chose to filter (using WebBlocker) in only 2 of 14 categories: "sexual acts" and "gross sexual depictions." These categories allowed us to fulfill our interpretation of the CIPA requirements without unnecessarily blocking sites that might have value to the curriculum.

Second, we generously use the override lists in our Internet filter, and we make sure media specialists can override the filter or have access to a machine that is completely unblocked in each media center so that questionably blocked sites can be reviewed and immediately accessed by staff and students if found to be useful.

Our district media/technology committee decided that any teacher or media specialist may have a site unblocked by simply requesting it—no questions asked. We also decided that teaching staff must continue to monitor students on the Internet as if no filter were present. The technicians now know that it is the respon-

sibility of the teaching staff to see that students do not access inappropriate materials, not theirs.

Third, we treat requests for the blocking of specific Web sites as we would any other material challenge. Our district, like most, has a “reconsideration” policy outlining procedures to follow when someone requests that any material be removed from our schools, whether it is a book from a media center or classroom, a textbook chapter from the curriculum, or a video from the collection. The person making the request must specify what is objectionable about the material. A committee then carefully reviews the material and makes a recommendation to the school board about the material—whether to retain it or remove it. The school board decides the issue, based on the recommendations of the committee. Online resources are given the same rigorous review process before being blocked.

Finally, we take a proactive approach to ensuring good Internet use by students by encouraging media specialists and classroom teachers to:

- *Articulate personal values when using technology.* We encourage talking to students about ethical online conduct and setting clear limits about what is allowed and what is not allowed. We ask all staff members to be knowledgeable about the school's Acceptable Use Policy and work to help students understand it.
- *Build student trust.* If an inappropriate site is accidentally accessed, we encourage using the incident to teach some strategies about using clues in search result findings to discriminate between relevant and non-relevant sites.
- *Allow students personal use of the Internet.* If the Internet-connected computers are not being used for curricular purposes, students can research topics of interest. Students are far less likely to risk loss of In-

ternet privileges if that means losing access to things they enjoy.

- *Reinforce ethical behaviors and react to the misuse of technology.* Technology use behaviors are treated no differently than other behaviors—good or bad—and the consequences of such behaviors are equal. We try not to overreact to incidents of technological misuse. If a student were caught reading *Playboy* in paper form, it's doubtful we'd suspend all his or her reading privileges.
- *Model ethical behaviors.* All of us learn more from what others do than what they say. Verbalizing how we personally make decisions is a very powerful teaching tool, but it's useless to lecture about safe and appropriate use if we, ourselves, do not follow our own rules.
- *Create environments that help students avoid temptation.* Easily monitored computer screens, secure passwords, and required logins for network systems help remove the opportunities for technology misuse. An adult presence is a far more effective means of assuring good behavior than filtering software.
- *Assess children's understanding of ethical concepts.* We do not give technology use privileges until students have demonstrated that they know and can apply school policies.
- *Educate staff and parents about ethical technology use.* Through school newsletters, presentations at parent organization meetings, and through school orientation programs, our media specialists inform and enlist the aid of teachers and parents in teaching and enforcing good technology practices.

Maintaining both the concept of intellectual freedom and providing a healthy and educational online environment may seem to be a difficult balancing act. But so far, our district seems to have been able to both meet

the requirements of CIPA and give staff and students access to the greatest possible range of online resources. As an intellectual freedom advocate, I am monitoring the situation very closely!

Resources

Articles and Reports

Internet blocking in schools: A report on Internet access in public schools. (2003). San Francisco: Electronic Freedom Foundation. Available: http://www.eff.org/Censorship/Censorware/net_block_report/

Report to Congress—Children's Internet Protection Act: Pub. L. 106-554: Study of technology protection measures in section 1703. (2003). Washington, DC: National Telecommunications and Information Administration, U.S. Dept of Commerce. Available: http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntia-home/ntiageneral/cipa2003/CIPReport_08142003.htm

Richard, C. R., Resnick, P. J., Hansen, D. L., Derry, H. A., & Rideout, V. J. (2002). Does pornography-blocking software block access to health information on the Internet? *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 288(22), 2887–2894. Available: <http://www.law.umich.edu/Centers/AndPrograms/olin/papers/Winter2005/resnick2.pdf>

Thornburg, D., & Lin H. S. (Eds.). (2002). *Youth, pornography and the Internet.* Washington, DC: National Academies Press. Available: <http://www.nap.edu/books/0309082749/html/>

Web Sites

American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights: http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/statementspolis/statementsif/library_billrights.htm

American Library Association's Web Site on CIPA: <http://www.ala.org/ala/washoff/WOIssues/civilliberties/cipaweb/cipa.htm>

CIPA: <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c106:S.97.IS>:

Filtering the Internet: <http://www.infopeople.org/howto/filtering/>

Peacefire's How to Disable Your Blocking Software: <http://www.peacefire.org/bypass/>



Doug Johnson has been director of media and technology for the Mankato (Minnesota) Area Public Schools since 1991. Doug is a veteran author whose works have appeared in books, journals, and magazines. Doug serves on ISTE's board of directors and as volunteer editor of *L&L's Media Matters* column.